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SHAKSPERE AND MOLIÈRE.

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS.

“OF Menander I know only the few fragments,” so Goethe declared; “but these gave me so high an idea of him that I look upon this great Greek as the only man who could be compared with Molière”; and when he said this, the great poet, who was also a great critic, had only comedy in his mind, and this led him to pass over Shakspeare, who puts forth his topmost power only in tragedy. The comparison of Shakspeare and Molière, which the German did not care to draw, imposes itself upon us who speak English and who have been taught to hold Shakspeare as the standard by which the foremost writers of every other language must be measured. The English dramatist wrote in an era of expansion and of imaginative energy, and the French dramatist worked in a period of keen intelligence and of social reserve. The Englishman is the master of tragedy, who has also left us a group of delightful comedies; and the Frenchman is the master of comedy, who might have attained to the actual tragic, if only his life had been a little longer.

It is interesting and significant that Sophocles, Shakspeare and Molière, the supreme dramatists, held each of them a middle place in the successive stages of the most splendid expansion of the drama in their several tongues. Each of these noble eras was compact in a century, a little more or a little less. Æschylus was born 525 B.C., and Euripides died in 406; and Sophocles holds the position midway. Marlowe was born in 1565, and Shirley died in 1666; and Shakspeare flourishes a little before the middle of these hundred years. Corneille was born in 1606 and Racine died in 1699; and Molière runs his briefer career between them. And it may be noted also in Spain there elapsed only a little more than a century from the birth of Lope de Vega in 1562 to

the death of Calderon in 1681,—the Spanish period of dramatic activity beginning earlier than the English and lasting later than the French. Perhaps it was well for Sophocles, for Shakspeare and for Molière that they came forward at the maturity of the movement in which they were leaders, neither pioneers in its beginning nor laggards at the end when at last the original impulse was slackening.

Molière was only fifty-one when he died, the same age attained by Lessing and by Balzac. Shakspeare survived to be fifty-two, as Thackeray survived to be fifty-three. This comparatively premature death has an importance of its own. Even if they may have done their work thus early and have put forth all their powers before they died, they were deprived of that lingering aftermath of fame which came to Voltaire and Goethe and Victor Hugo, by the fact of survival beyond the threescore years and ten.

In the external circumstances of their several careers, Shakspeare and Molière are often curiously alike. They were both born in prosperous households of the middle class; and they were not stinted in their youth, although the affairs of both fathers may have become embarrassed later. Shakspeare may have gone to the grammar-school at Stratford; and Molière went to the best school in Paris, getting a more thorough training. Neither of them ever achieved the wide erudition of Lessing, still less the minute scholarship of Racine. Both broke away from their homes to become actors; and both after acting for a while undertook to write plays. Both began modestly as dramatists, content at first to imitate and to patch up earlier work. Even when they had given over this prentice labor, their earlier pieces contained little promise of their later mastery. In "Love's Labor's Lost" and in the "*Etourdi*" we can see clever young writers striving to show off their cleverness, delighting in their own fantasies and not yet knowing enough about life itself to be willing to rely on it unaided. Molière was the manager of his company, while Shakspeare was only one of several partners in his; and both of them had a shrewd sagacity in business affairs, governing their private fortunes with skill, putting money out at interest and amassing a comfortable reserve. Both of them liked the good things of life; and neither of them took an austere view of mankind. Shakspeare was as little attracted toward the Puritan as Molière was toward the Jansenist.

Both of them made unhesitating use of the works of their predecessors and contemporaries, despoiling alike the alien and the native, taking their raw material wherever they found it, as though they disdained the trouble of mere invention, choosing to put forth their full imagination rather in the interpretation of the stories which others less gifted had failed to use to full advantage. Both of them, despite this casual borrowing of situation, were boldly original in their creation of character. Shakspeare found his supreme triumph in the display of character as it expands under opportunity or disintegrates under temptation, whereas Molière, presenting it as permanent, revealed it to us in all its aspects. Both of them were copious in their productivity and swift in execution. Ben Jonson records that Shakspeare "never blotted a line"; and Boileau tried in vain to get Molière to correct. Both of them were helpful to younger authors, Shakspeare to Jonson and Molière to Racine. Both of them in their later years on occasion collaborated with fellow dramatists, Shakspeare with Fletcher and Molière with Corneille. Both of them cared little for the publication of their pieces; and it was only several years after the death of either that his complete plays were published by the pious care of surviving comrades in the theatre. The manuscripts of both have vanished and we have from their pens only a few signatures to legal documents. Both of them had the gift of friendship and were highly esteemed by their associates, even if neither of them was really appreciated by his contemporaries. Both of them took life soberly, never surprised that it was not better. Neither of them much exceeded a half-century of life; Shakspeare, who lived a few months longer, had done his work and had withdrawn to rest, while Molière was still in harness, with his goal not yet attained. Neither of them seems to have sought glory for its own sake, satisfied with immediate success and caring little for mere fame.

Many of these resemblances in the career of the two great dramatists may be merely fortuitous; but some of them are strangely significant. And it would not be difficult to pick out other points of similarity or of contrast in their works. The "Comedy of Errors" is not unlike "Amphitryon" in one of its devices; and "Richard III" is not unlike "Don Juan" in its chief character. Ford is akin to Arnolphe in his jealousy, and Autolycus is akin to Mascarille in his resourceful knavery,

both rascals employing on one occasion the very same trick of not letting a robbed man suspect his loss. Alceste can be contrasted better with Jaques than with Timon. Harpagon repays a comparative study with Shylock, and Tartuffe with Iago. Hamlet's advice to the Players can be set over against the personal discussion of actors and of the art of acting which Molière put into the "*Impromptu de Versailles*."

There can be no dispute as to the perfect understanding of the principles of the histrionic art possessed by both Shakspeare and Molière; and there can also be little doubt that in the actual practice of the art Molière was superior to Shakspeare. Molière was acknowledged to be the foremost comedian of his time even by those who thought ill of his plays. Shakspeare's position as an actor is far more modest, so far as we can judge from the fact that he did not venture to appear in any of the more important parts in his own plays, whether tragic or comic. "Hamlet" was composed for Burbage, its creator apparently contenting himself with the humbler character of the Ghost, for which dignity and delivery were sufficient equipment; and he is believed also to have impersonated old Adam in "As You Like It." No doubt, Shakspeare had a good presence and probably his elocution deserved praise, since this is a quality within the control of intelligence. But the great English dramatist must have been more or less deficient in the fundamental mimetic faculty, without which intelligence alone is ineffective. We know also that Shakspeare was not in love with acting, as Molière was, and this distaste for the art may be either the cause or the consequence of his lack of prominence in his calling.

To push the comparison between these two great dramatic poets too far would be unfair to Molière, since Shakspeare is the master-mind of all literature. He soared to heights and he explored depths, and he had a range to which Molière could not pretend. His is the spirit of soul-searching tragedy, of youthful and graceful romantic-comedy, of dramatic-romance, of dramatized history; and in no one of these is Molière his rival. But in the comedy of real life he is not Molière's rival. In every variety of the comic drama Molière is unequalled—in farce, in the comedy of situation, in the comedy of character, and in the comedy which is almost stiffened into drama yet without ceasing to be comedy. Shakspeare's greatest strength

is in tragedy, after all, even though he delights us also with comedy. Molière is at home in comedy only, even though he had a latent tragic possibility. "In depth, penetrativeness and powerful criticism of life, Molière, comic as he is and not tragic, belongs to the same family as Shakspeare and Sophocles," so Matthew Arnold maintains, pointing out that he had also "one great advantage over Shakspeare" in that "he wrote for a more developed theatre, a more developed society."

Arnold also suggests that Molière was "probably by nature a better theatre-poet than Shakspeare; he had a keener sense for theatrical situation." This is a hard saying, for it is difficult to admit that Shakspeare was not a born playwright who acquired an early mastery of his craft. But the English dramatist was less ambitious than the French, less conscientious, and less careful. Admirable as his workmanship is in his nobler tragedies, it can be very slovenly, especially in his dramatic-romances, "*Cymbeline*" and the "*Winter's Tale*." In his romantic-comedies he generally tumbles together two or three independent stories, leaving us to discover, as best we can, which one of them he intended to centre our interest on. Molière has only a single plot, orderly and lucid; and this is partly because he sees life clearly and uncomplicated. Coquelin asserted that Molière has more art and more method than Shakspeare; "he graduates his effects better."

The real distinction between Molière and Shakspeare merely as playwrights is that Molière is an artist always and that Shakspeare is an artist only intermittently and when the spirit moves him. Molière always does his best; even a play of an inferior type he makes as good as he can, as good as a play of that type can be. Shakspeare is an artist putting forth his full power only when he happens to be keenly interested in his subject,—in "*Othello*," for example, and in "*Macbeth*." If we examine his work as a whole we can see that he frequently does not exert his constructive skill. Often he is careless of form, huddling his action together anyhow, satisfied with the easiest way of handling it and relying rather on his insight into character and motive and on his unquenchable springs of poetry. Wisdom was his for the asking, and almost without taking thought; but solid construction taxes the mind and Shakspeare often neglects the preliminary scaffolding which a vital action always demands and which Molière and Sophocles never fail to provide.

The explanation for this is not far to seek; indeed it may be found in Arnold's suggestion. The English dramatist was working for a less developed theatre than the French and for a less developed society. There was no standard of artistic perfection imposed on him by the pressure of an educated public opinion. There was nothing to keep him up to the mark, except his own ambition; and this was uncertain and even flagging. He seems often to have felt that what was good enough for his uncritical audience, for the unlettered groundlings, was good enough for him. This is why he rarely rises superior to the traditions of the rude and semi-mediæval theatre for which he worked, content to avail himself of its traditions and to take the short cuts it authorized. This is why Iago is less subtly presented than Tartuffe. Iago is frankly a villain, and he knows himself for what he is, unbosoming himself freely and frequently to the spectators, whereas Tartuffe never drops the mask until he stands at bay, and may very possibly have had no suspicion of his own evilness.

Not a few of those who have most highly appreciated Shakspeare have felt this occasional carelessness, although most of them have failed to express it. Coleridge links the two masters together and tells us that "in the comedy of Shakspeare and Molière the more accurate my knowledge and the more profoundly I think, the greater is the satisfaction that mingles with my laughter." Also George Meredith, in his discussion of the comic spirit and of the idea of comedy, recurs again and again to Molière, holding him up to our admiration as the unsurpassable model, and declaring that "if life is likened to the comedy of Molière, there is no scandal in the comparison." And this is what no one could rightly say of the comedy of Shakspeare, who put his richest comic character into a straggling chronicle-play and whose romantic-comedies are compounded of arbitrary fantasy; delightful as they are, they bear no relation to real life as it ever existed anywhere but in a fancied Illyria or in that distant Bohemia which is a desert country by the sea.

Not only does Shakspeare refrain from dealing with the men and women of his own time in his own country, not only are his most comic characters sporadic and incidental to a tale of pure romance, of young lovers meeting and mating in the springtime of their lives, he is also willing always to gratify the English and Elizabethan liking for an empty playing with words, for a wit

which is merely external and almost detachable, and which unrelated to character tends in no wise to elucidate it. His humor is frequently verbal, which Molière's never is. "Molière was no mere wit," so Coquelin reminded us. "Puns, points, collocations of droll sounds,—these are all absent from his work. . . . He wished to bring a laugh only by touches of nature. It is not from him as an author that his witticisms come; it is from his characters; and they come naturally and by the force of things." Of course, this is true very frequently of Shakspeare also, especially of his Falstaff; but often it is not true, and his characters descend to the bandying of repartee and to the making of quips which do not serve to reveal character or to advance the story. Molière indeed declared his own principle in the "*Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*," when he asserted that a certain joke had not been put in by the author "as a clever saying of his own, but only as a thing that characterized the man."

Perhaps the explanation for this willingness of Shakspeare to give his audience the verbal witticisms they relished may be sought in the fact that his romantic-comedies are more romantic than they are comic, whereas Molière's comedies are essentially realistic. Touchstone and even Jaques are only incidental and accessory; and the core of Shakspeare's comedy is the coming together of Rosalind and Orlando. Molière has a pair of young lovers merely to hold his plot together, to make a story around Orgon and Chrysale and Harpagon. Shakspeare puts his pair of young lovers in the forefront; they are his comedy and all else imports little. In other words, Shakspeare's comic characters interest us by what they are, whereas Molière's often take our attention more by what they do. Comic action is the life of many a play of Molière's, although not of the greatest; and as a result character is more simply presented in Molière's pieces than in Shakspeare's: it is less complex. So it is that Shakspeare's clowns and other of his humorous figures wear their motley outside, while Molière's characters wear it within.

The secret of the acceptable mingling of romance and of comedy is Shakspeare's only; and what he did in the vein of romantic-comedy he alone could do. The form itself may be anomalous and open to adverse analysis; but the result is charming—when it is Shakspeare who stirs the mixture with the magic of his lyric gift. But of the few who have sought to follow in the path he

trod through the faery woodland, none have grasped the elusive prize. In other words, Shakspeare's comedies are highly individual; they are his and his alone. They are not characteristic of his nationality; they are little related to the manners and customs of his own time and of his own people. They are not racial, as Molière's comedies are. They are too idealistic, too remote from every-day life, from the rude experience of actuality, to be all that comedy can be. They belong to a very special type, too lyric, perhaps even too poetic, to be acceptable as a picture of the real world about us; and it is just such a picture that we have a right to expect in comedy. The romantic drama may voice our aspirations and show us what we dream that we would like to be, and tragedy may set before us the things we dread; but comedy has for its duty to depict us as we are actually. When it most completely fulfils its function comedy is not individual, like Shakspeare's, but social, like Molière's.

Undeniable as is Shakspeare's comic force, indisputable as is his power of creating humorous character and of handling amusing situation, it is not in comedy that he has most satisfactorily exhibited his consummate genius as a dramatist. For the full display of his art he needed the towering framework of tragedy; and it is in comedy that he is less of a theatre-poet than Molière. It is by his tragedy far more than by his comedy that Shakspeare has conquered the nations of the modern world. Hamlet and Othello and Macbeth are known to millions who have never heard of Viola and Beatrice and Anne Page. This is due partly to the exportability of tragedy, which works with the universal emotions. A great tragedy can go abroad, whereas a great comedy has often to tarry at home because of its very supremacy as a comedy, because of the adequacy of its reproduction of contemporary reality. "Julius Cæsar" can be taken anywhere, and its tragic action will arouse the interest of the spectators whatever their race or their degree of culture; but the "*Femmes Savantes*" can meet with fit and full appreciation only when it is performed before those who can understand its strokes and who can recognize the types it presents. The passions are much the same the wide world over; but wit and humor are often local, and character often depends on time and place.

The predominant influence which Shakspeare has exerted upon modern tragedy Molière has exerted upon modern comedy. The

only dramatist of the nineteenth century who sought to recall again in his own plays the evanescent grace and fleeting beauty of Shakspeare's romantic-comedy is Alfred de Musset. All the other writers of comedy, not only in France, but in England and in Germany, have found their model in Molière. This is due partly to the fact that the practical playwrights of to-day, adjusting their plays to the theatre of our own era, shrink instinctively from the imitation of Shakspeare, whose comedies are semi-mediæval because they were in his time adjusted to the ruder Elizabethan platform-stage and because they therefore need to be taken apart and put together again before they can be represented on the picture-frame stage of our latter-day playhouses. But it is due also to the fact that in Molière the modern dramatists find the outer form which concords with the conditions of the theatre of the twentieth century, and also the final model of the comedy which represents largely and liberally the realities of life.

Less myriad-minded than Shakspeare, less lyric and less poetic, lacking the depth and the width of the English dramatist, dying early before his tragic possibilities had a chance to unfold themselves, Molière is more completely the master of comedy. He is a more conscious and conscientious artist in his structure. He has more accurately achieved to the ideal of that high comedy which is the mirror of society and the revelation of humanity in its larger relations. That he, rather than Shakspeare, should have most richly expressed himself in comedy, is a strange thing, since Matthew Arnold, borrowing the hint from Sainte-Beuve, is plainly right in saying that "Shakspeare has more joy than Molière, more assurance and more peace." Perhaps Molière's humor flowered out of his melancholy and his satire out of his sadness; but whatever their obscure roots, the humor is there in his plays, the satire also, and, in addition, the sheer fun which brings irresistible laughter.

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